

by David Rothschild

Human resources departments at the Native casinos we work with spend a great deal of time — and rightfully so — teaching the history and traditions of the tribe and the casino to new hires. They do a very good job of inculcating new employees on the rules and regulations of their properties. Expectations are explained and consequences are delineated for failure to follow these procedures.

The piece I think is missing in this training is preparing the new employees, many of whom are entering the workforce for the first time, for both the rewards and the challenges that face them in the reality that is the restaurant lifestyle.

The Good Stuff (our trainees have thought of most of these)

There are always jobs for skilled front-of-house staff. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's 2006 statistics, there are more service jobs than ever before. More than 7.4 million people held jobs in food and beverage service in 2006. Waiter/waitress positions accounted for more than 2.3 million, bartenders 495,000, host/hostesses 351,000. This doesn't include fast food workers. A good server can take his skills and, with very little modification, work anywhere in the country.

No two days are alike in a restaurant. Maybe it was bad yesterday. You can count on it being entirely different tomorrow. It's not a nine-to-five job. It isn't sedentary; you don't sit at a desk all day. You don't take work home with you at night. There can be instant gratification for a job well done. If you had satisfied guests, you'll feel good about yourself following the shift.

You work in a clean, usually air-conditioned environment. The hours are relatively short, and you can make decent money. As a server, you're an independent contractor. You have your own sales area in a restaurant — your station. Your income depends on your skills and your motivation.

As a server, you get to meet some of the most interesting, entertaining and fun people during your day at work — and those are just your fellow workers! You also have the opportunity to meet nice, interesting, and often influential people among the guests and casino hierarchy.

When I hear people say restaurant service is a dead-end career, I say "Hogwash!" For an ambitious restaurant person, there are plenty of opportunities for advancement. Many servers go into management. Others have become teachers, food brokers, food stylists, salespeople and gone into a myriad of other related fields with the customer service skills they learned in foodservice.

The Not-So-Good Stuff (we need to make our new hires aware of these)

It's not a nine-to-five job. You work weekends and holidays, maybe

F & B



preparing
staff for
the service
lifestyle

swing or graveyard shifts. You'll be working when friends and family are sleeping or playing. Maintaining relationships is difficult when you and your spouse or significant other are working different shifts and rarely get to spend time together. Breakups and divorces are common in the restaurant workforce.

You'll often be thrown into the job with very little technical-skills training. Several days of shadowing a senior server and perhaps some menu testing might be the extent of your training. While pre-employment training is common for other casino jobs, formalized food and beverage training is often overlooked.

Working for tips takes getting used to. Monthly income can vary greatly, so it's very hard to prepare and stick to a budget. Your income is dependent on tips, or as some servers say, "on the generosity of strangers." Many servers blow half of their tips "winding down" in the local pub after shift. Gambling — whether at your casino or another property — can also take its toll. Saving tips in order to pay bills takes discipline. A server's paycheck at the end of two weeks doesn't go very far after taxes are deducted and tips are taxed.

You don't take work home with you, but every career server I've spoken with has occasional waiter nightmares. In these dreams, you find yourself "in the weeds," overwhelmed by an unserviceable number of guests and unworkable circumstances. You wake up in a cold sweat, wondering why you still do this for a living.

No one ever tells you restaurant service can be really stressful. There's no place to blow off steam. You can't get mad at the guest. You can't yell at the cooks or supervisor. I know servers who go into the woods and primal scream after the shift. I always preferred hitting a speed bag.

Medical, dental or retirement plans haven't yet become the norm. While more and more tribal casinos are providing health plans for their full-time employees, spouse and family coverage can be expensive. Part-timers aren't typically covered. It's a rare server who has set up a 401(k) plan or IRA for the time when he/she is ready to retire.

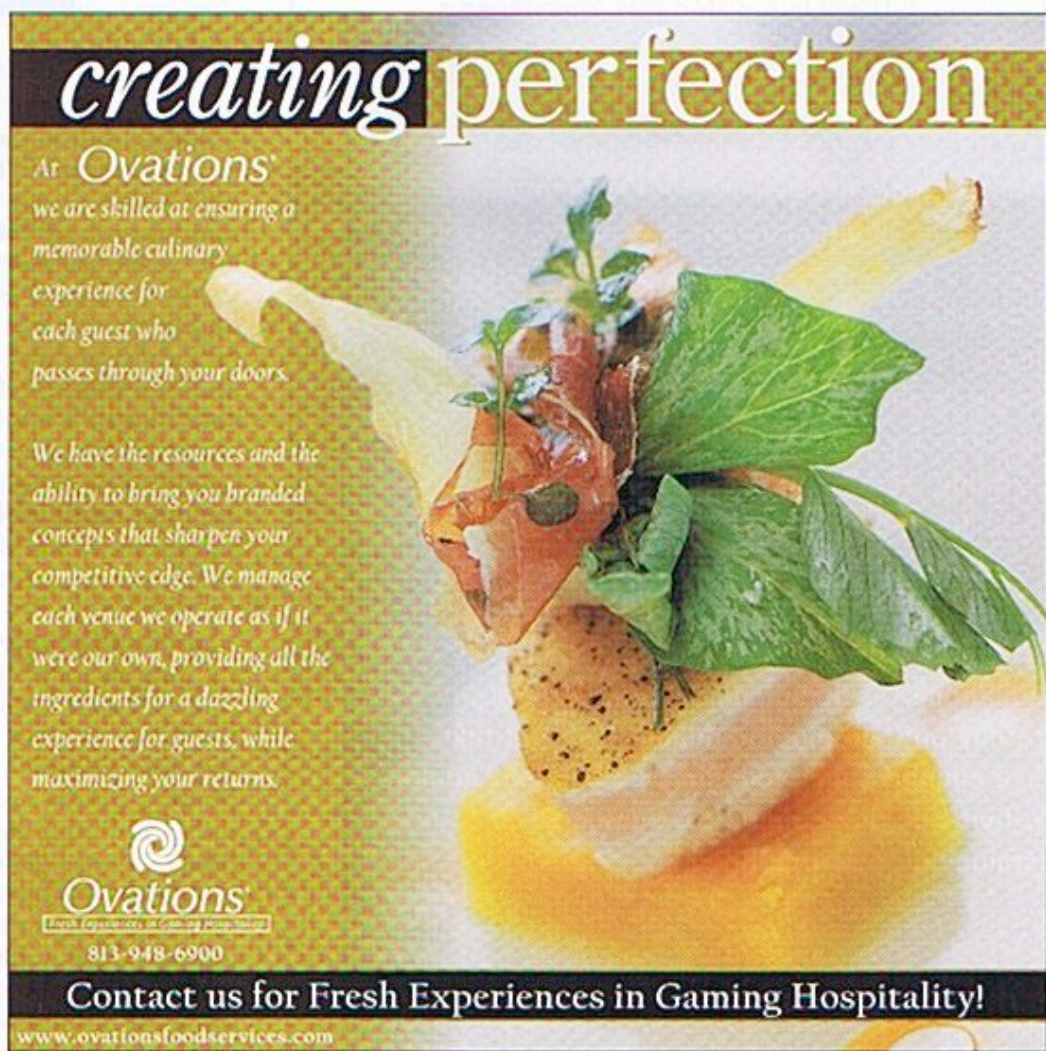
Occupational hazards of food and beverage service should be addressed in the initial training. Foot, leg and back problems are common due to the hours on our feet on hard floors. We need to recommend (or supply) good, safe footwear for our servers. We

need to train them in the proper way to lift heavy loads, keeping the workplace free of obstacles, and cleaning up spills to avoid slips and falls.

The mental health aspect of the job is also often overlooked in the discussion. Alcohol and drug problems are much more prevalent than we are willing to admit. There are often late hours and close proximity to alcohol — a very dangerous combination. Studies have shown that both casino and restaurant environments are breeding grounds for alcoholism and, as casino F&B employees, we fall into both categories.

So there you have it; some of the pluses and minuses of working in food and beverage. No doubt you and your staff can come up with other advantages and pitfalls that affect your work and personal lives. Let's continue to remind our front-of-house teams of the up side of restaurant service. But let's also warn them of the "dark side." **NAC**


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